

Sister Eugenia O'Laughlin

Interviewed by  
Miss Betty Turnell  
for the  
Decatur Public Library

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Sister Eugenia O'Laughlin Interview

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This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Sister Eugenia O'Laughlin. She is a retired Ursuline teacher and freelance writer.

Sister Eugenia:

Thank you, Miss Turnell. I feel highly privileged in being asked to make this recording. I would like also to thank Sister Louise, who has helped me to get the material organized. She acted really as my eyes because I can no longer see. I will be unable to use cards so what I say will have to be recorded from memory. I would also like to thank my sisters, Shan Durkin and Frances, for some details about some of the early scenes I am going to record, and my brother, Andrew, for his help in preparing the typescript.

I would like to say this is not a scholarly dissertation. It is simply a human interest story and I hope you, Miss Turnell, and anyone who listens to it will enjoy the reading or listening as much as I have done in preparation.

As Julie Andrews sings in one of her songs in the Sound of Music - since it is a story we will have to begin at the beginning.

I'm going to take you back to the year 1866. The place is a small town in Arkansas which is called Jenny Lind.

Jeanie (her name was Jane) Hamilton and her mother, Sarah, were just coming out of the general store where they had been doing some shopping. As they emerged, Jeanie noticed the cowboy who always seemed to be there every time she came to do her shopping. She could hear the pounding of his high-topped boots. She noticed the levis tucked into the tops of his boots. His denim shirt was open at the throat and his bandanna handkerchief was tied, cowboy fashion, around his neck. She was a little amused when she noticed how his shoulder-length auburn hair bounced up and down as he walked. She knew his face was handsome, although his big sombrero hid it, because she had seen that face several times before. She was impressed by the high forehead, his well shaped nose above the auburn mustache. She knew quite well that he had very white teeth because he had grinned at her many times when they passed, but they had never met. As he turned the corner, Jeanie turned to her mother and said, "Ma, that's the man I'm going to marry." Her mother had never seen him before, but she knew of him because everybody in that small town knew about Frank O'Laughlin, the dashing young cowboy who had done a lot of traveling and was remarkable for his riding and his love of horses. Mrs. Hamilton looked at Jeanie and said to her, "What made you think of such a thing as that? You don't even know that man, and besides, he's a Papist."

Jeanie said, "It makes no difference. I don't know how or when but some day I'm going to marry him."

Time passed, and early in the next spring Jeanie's mother died. Then she, the 15-year-old daughter, the third child of the family who had been born to Hugh and Sarah Ann Hamilton shortly after their coming to America, took over the family chores. She knew very well how to do everything with

keeping a house. Her bread was the best bread that anyone could ever bake. She was very adept at baking cake and their little cabin where she lived with Pa and her younger sister, Sarah, and her brother, Hughie, was kept immaculately clean.

Then, one Sunday afternoon, Jeanie dressed in a dark red velvet dress her mother had made for her, went to the village well to get water. She was startled when a man's voice said to her, "May I get that for you?" She turned to him and here was her cowboy - the very first time they had ever met.

She replied, "I can do it myself."

He said, "I can do it easier. Please let me."

She let him, all the time rejoicing in her heart that it had come about that way. He asked to carry the bucket home. She consented, and there Frank met Jeanie's father, Hugh Hamilton, for the first time.

Both Pa and Frank were delighted in one sense to meet because Hugh had heard about Frank from Jeanie and when Frank asked if he might court Jeanie, Pa replied that he would have to know something more about him. He said, "You probably are not aware, but my family and I are very good Methodists and I hear that you are a Papist. If this can be ironed out, I will give you permission.

Frank assured him that it could be taken care of and the permission was given. The courtship went on as courtships do and while the couple didn't meet too many times they really did get to know each other. Finally, Frank came to the point where he began questioning Jeanie about how she might feel about marrying a Papist and raising the children Catholic. She said there would be no trouble there. No engagement was made at that time, but finally, Jeanie received a letter. It was a very special letter for many reasons.

First of all, she had never received a letter. She noticed that it was on very good stationery and down in the left hand corner of the envelope was a red rose. She turned the envelope over and over, trying to decide who it was from. She thought, "It could only be from Frank, but would he really write to me?"

So with her heart beating hard, she opened the envelope. The letter was from Frank, and it was tantamount to a proposal. She read it a second time; then, because she had a very special errand to do, she slipped the envelope into her apron pocket and turned the pocket toward the wall so the letter would be sure not to fall out. Then, she went her way.

When she returned, she was really dismayed. There stood Pa reading her letter. How it fell out of her pocket, how he got hold of it, she never knew, but she knew from the look on his face that he wasn't very happy about it. As she came in, he said, "Jeanie, what's going on here? Doesn't that young cowboy know that he should talk to me first? You write to him right now and tell him so."

This Jeanie promptly did, and a letter came back post-haste to Pa, telling him that he, Frank, had really intended talking to him first, but he wanted to know before he did that, how Jeanie felt about it and that he, himself, would be there in a few days.

Since Frank was in Ft. Smith at the time, he had to take the little train between Jenny Lind and Ft. Smith to get there. When he arrived and he and Pa sat down to talk, at first Pa objected to his asking Jeanie to marry him because, for the first reason, he didn't want her living on a ranch. Frank assured him that he had already left the ranch, that he had secured work in a coal mine so that question was settled. Then Pa brought up the question of the difference in religion. Frank explained that could

be arranged when he would get a dispensation because of its being a mixed marriage, but he added that he would want any children they would have to be raised as Catholics. Pa agreed to that.

Frank assured him that if Jeanie consented to marry him he would never influence her in any way to become a Catholic.

With Pa's permission obtained, Frank went in search of Jeanie. He didn't have to go too far; the two met and decided to go out to a place near the well where they knew there was a log and, sitting on the log, they began making plans for the wedding. They set the date for January 31 of the following year, which would be 1889. Frank said to Jeanie, "Since both of our mothers are dead, you will need someone to help you with your trousseau and preparing the things you will need for house keeping. Would you be willing to let me ask my Aunt Nora O'Halloran and my cousins to help?"

Jeanie was delighted and before long she and Aunt Nora and the cousins, who had come to Jenny Lind, went back to Ft. Smith and did a lot of shopping. They came back laden with all sorts of things - everything Aunt Nora felt would need to be made up before the wedding.

Jeanie had a small trunk. She pulled this out from some hidden corner and as Aunt Nora and the cousins worked and sewed, they began packing it. Finally, even the wedding dress was completed and hung carefully in a corner where it would be well protected. Then, Jeanie let Frank know that things were pretty well prepared, and would he come to make the very last arrangements. This he did in haste.

Frank came as he promised. The little trunk was so filled with the things that Auntie Nora and the cousins had helped Jeanie make that she had to sit on it before Frank could really get it fastened tightly. Then he told her that he had taken care of all the arrangements, that the wedding would take place in the little rectory in Ft. Smith, and that he and Aunt

Nora and all the cousins - there were a lot of them - would meet her at the station around noon on the 31st.

That was just a few days before the 31st. After Frank left, Jeanie noticed a small velvet box lying on the table. She was almost afraid to open it. She knew it was Frank's wedding gift to her, but what could it be? It couldn't be a ring because the box was too long. After a few minutes hesitation she opened it and lying there on the velvet was the most beautiful brooch she had ever seen in her life. She clapped her hands delightedly and vowed that any time she dressed to go any place that would be part of her apparel.

Almost before Jeanie knew it, the 31st had arrived. When she awoke in the morning, she saw that a few flakes of snow were falling. She bathed and dressed partially; since there was no one there to help her, she arranged her long, black hair in a French knot at the nape of her neck and combed out the bangs she had had up in curlers; then, she went to the corner and, with trembling fingers, took down the cornsilk wedding gown. It was beautiful, made in the Polonaise style of that time. She flipped it carefully over her head as she admired the row of tiny little buttons marching down the front. The loops at the side made her waist even slenderer than she had thought it was. The tips of her high buttoned shoes peeped out as she walked toward the mirror to put on the final touches. Being satisfied with herself, she took the straw poke bonnet, put it carefully on her head and tied the ribbons under her chin. Then, carefully she put on her mother's earrings and last of all the brooch which Frank had given her.

By that time Pa was getting a little anxious and he called, "Jeanie, if you don't hurry, we're going to miss the train."

So she quickly walked to the door, where she met him and little Sarah and Hughie, her younger sister and brother. The four of them went to the station, where they boarded the train. Even Pa could hardly believe that this elegantly dressed young lady could be his daughter. She was truly beautiful. Before they reached the station at Ft. Smith - Jeanie had been looking out the window long before they got there - she saw Aunt Nora and all the other relatives gathered on the platform. In a minute Frank came hurrying to meet the train, even before it stopped. She gasped. She knew he was handsome, but she had never seen him dressed in anything but the cowboy outfit. His shiny black shoes, his really black trousers with gray stripes, his cut away coat, his white starched shirt and black bow tie made him look out of this world, and then when she saw the auburn hair scarcely showing below the black derby, she could hardly wait to rush into his arms. By that time the train had come to a stop, and he lifted her down carefully and all the relatives gathered around and everybody got to talking and nobody listened until Frank finally said, "We've got to get moving. This wedding is scheduled for one-thirty and it's almost that time. Let's go."

So they all lined up and started. The church was just a couple of blocks from the station; but, because it was a mixed marriage, the ceremony would be performed in the shabby little rectory. The guest room had been prepared for the wedding and the bride and groom stood before the priest in his black cassock, white surplice, and white stole. He was waiting there patiently with his book for the wedding ceremony. The wedding began and went very smoothly until just before Father pronounced Frank and Jane man and wife. Pa went to the pair and said, "Pardon me, Reverend. I would like to kiss my daughter once more before she marries a Papist." The permission was given, the kiss was given, the ceremony was soon concluded, and the



wedding party proceeded to the hotel where the wedding dinner was to be served.

When all were seated, the dinner was served, and it was delicious. They had a hilarious time, everybody enjoying every minute of it. After sitting there for a couple of hours, the ladies decided that they would take a stroll down the street because it really was something to be in a city as big as Ft. Smith; so they left and went window shopping, taking a good stroll. In the meantime, the men were enjoying themselves with probably a few glasses of beer, certainly smoking, and discussing and settling all the problems of the world. Suddenly, Pa realized that a very long time had passed. Where were those ladies? What were they doing? He was going out to look for them. When he rose, Frank rose also, and both of them moved toward the door. Just before they reached it, the ladies came in, and Pa said, "Jeanie, where have you been? I've been worried about you. I feel like boxing your ears."

But Frank walked over to Jane, put his hand on her shoulder, and said, "Nobody boxes Jane now. She belongs to me." She, standing on tip toes, put her arms around his neck and gave him the kiss which she had denied him once before right after their engagement, when he had asked for it. Now she realized she was his wife, they were married, and he certainly deserved that kiss.

When it began to darken a little, and the O'Hallorans and all the cousins departed, Frank and Jane went to their room in the hotel where they were going to spend the few days of their honeymoon.

These days passed quickly; then they went to the little cabin in Jenny Lind that Frank had purchased and Jane was now going to make into a home.

She set to work at once, turning it into a real home, sewing up

curtains, getting out the things from the little trunk, making the place as home-like as she could. Frank went to work every morning in the mine. Sometimes Aunt Nora and the cousins came to visit. Then one day, Jane said to Aunt Nora, "I am going to need some baby things. Would you please help me make them?"

Oh, Aunt Nora was delighted. Nothing could have pleased her more. So again they went shopping, things were purchased, and again sewing went on in Jenny Lind.

Married life proceeded, as married lives usually do. Then on the 19th of December, 1889, my father, for now I can call him that, was in the yard sawing wood. The lady who had been taking care of my mother came to the door and said, "Yoo-hoo, Frank!"

He dropped the saw and came running. When he reached the steps, she said to him, "You have a little girl. Are you sorry?"

He said, "Sorry for what?"

She said, "That it's a girl."

He said, "Good Lord, no. I'll be glad if they're all girls."

He rushed in to see Mama and me, and when he poked at me with his fore finger, I grabbed it and held on and then we were friends for the rest of our days.

And because Papa was so willing to have all girls, God sent him and my mother four boys and four girls.

My mother, keeping her promise to see that the children would be raised Catholic, took me the first time the priest came to Jenny Lind, which he didn't do very often, and I was baptized. My father at that time was working from 6 o'clock in the morning until 6 o'clock at night. He was, I'm sure, very tired, and I'm sure he felt that Mama could very well take care of such details as having children baptized, so he left it to her.

Time went on and in two years my brother Hugh was born. When he was about two years old, and I must have been about four, I had just gotten up and was still in my long white night gown, when for some reason or other, I got mad at Mama, and I said to her, "I'm not going to stay in this house any more." She had never studied child psychology, but she knew how to practice it. All she said was, "Well, nothing's stopping you."

So I grabbed up my little red chair, swung it over my arm, put my rag doll over the other arm, hiked up my long night gown, and started down the street. In the meantime Mama, although I didn't know it, was watching me from behind the curtain. I marched myself down to the end of the block. By that time I suppose my legs were too tired so I turned around and went back.

Mama didn't say anything. I climbed into my chair at the table. She served me my breakfast, which I ate in silence, and, little as I was, I must have had a realization that in that house, I depended on my mother.

By the time I was five years old, we had moved to Springfield, Illinois, and it was there that the most important incident of my whole life occurred. We lived next door to a family who were Catholics. They had a little girl, Laura, who was about my own age, and Laura and I played a great deal together. One day, I'm not sure how it came about, but Laura said something to me about God. I had never heard of God so I rushed into the house, and I still remember this, my mother was ironing, my father was sitting over by the window reading his newspaper. I stepped around in front of Mama, and I said to her, "Mama, Mama! Who is God?"

She set the iron down in dismay and looked at my Dad. She said, "Frank, did you hear what she said?"

He nodded, and she said, "Well, we can't let her grow up like this. I have never taught them my prayers. I couldn't teach them Catholic prayers because I didn't know any." She said, "What are we going to do about it?"

My father didn't know right then what could be done. He had been so busy trying to earn a living for us that he had depended on Mama, and he forgot that she didn't know all these things. So during the afternoon, Mama worried about the matter. She was just determined that things would have to be different. So she finally went over to Mrs. Mack, the lady next door, and she told her the whole story. She said to her, "What can I do? I just can't let this go on this way."

Mrs. Mack said, "Well, I don't think I could help you like a priest could. If you would like to go and talk to pastor, I'll be glad to take you."

Mama said, yes, she would be glad to go. So Mrs. Mack took her, and the Father and she had several conversations. He got the whole background, and got the picture and he said, "Well, if you really want to know all about these things, the best way would be to take the Baltimore Catechism, and study it, question and answer. When you come across something you don't understand, and you'd like to have explained, come back and I'll help you the best I can."

So she took the Catechism, she went home with it, and she began reading. When she came to a place where she needed an explanation, she'd go back and talk to Father about it. And, of course, he incidentally gave her more and more information. Finally, she knew the Catechism almost from memory, and by the time she had finished these talks with Father and had studied the Catechism thoroughly, she began to see that she believed the Catholic Church to be the true church, and she told Father so.

She said, "What do I do now?"

He said, "Were you ever baptized?"

She said, "Yes, my mother, a devout Methodist, had all of us baptized

when we were infants."

He said, "Well, usually when a person comes into the church who has been baptized, we give them what we call "conditional baptism" because there are certain things required that we want to be sure are included. Would you want to do that?"

Yes, she would, and was converted, and my life as a Catholic began. She began teaching my brother and me Catholic prayers; of course, Brother had been baptized too.

We called him "Brother" because I hadn't wanted him when he first came, and he became "Brother" to the whole world. His real name was Hugh.

By and by, Mama was ready for baptism. She made her first Holy Communion, and then the whole family went to church together. Later on, when my father was dying, he said, "Jane, if I ever get to heaven, it will be because of your good prayers and good example."

No more devout Catholic ever existed than my mother. All through her life she was the one who influenced us most.

We moved again, this time to Willisville, near Sparta, Illinois. These moves were necessary, because my father, being a coal miner, had to follow the mines and find work wherever mines were open.

I must have been about eight when we moved to Sparta and from the beginning, I attended public schools because there were no Catholic schools anyplace in which we lived. Even in Sparta there were no Catholic schools. I was nearing the time when I was ready for my first Holy Communion. We were not permitted to receive Holy Communion in those days until we had passed our 12th birthday. There were only three of us in that first communion class and, in order for us to be well prepared, Father Van Delft took us for instructions as soon as school let out, and we went each day for

our catechism lessons and for explanations of our faith and for the Bible stories beginning with the Old Testament and running into the New.

In addition, my mother saw to it that I studied my catechism perfectly, and she helped me with questions outside of the catechism that I wanted to know.

By August 15, Father felt we three in the first communion class were ready. In the meantime my mother had made me a beautiful white organdy dress with lots of tucks, tiny tucks, and very narrow beautiful lace. I had also gotten new slippers with shiny buckles and, of course, we wore long black hose. On the morning of my first communion day Mama watched me carefully, lest I break my fast because in those days we were required to fast from midnight until after Holy Communion the next day. Now people have the opportunity of taking solid food up to within an hour of the time of receiving Holy Communion, and water is permitted even a few minutes before.

But to go back now to the first communion morning. Mama helped me dress carefully.

First of all she saw that my curls were just in the right place. She adjusted my Liberty silk veil over my head. It fell to the tail of my dress. Next, she put my white wreath on, and for the first time I wore fingerless mitts. I felt that I was really grown up. Mama didn't want me to look in the mirror because she wanted me to be sure that the important thing this day was the fact that Jesus was coming to me for the first time and I tried to concentrate so that when we got to church I think I was properly awed with the thought that God in a few minutes would be coming to me, a twelve year old girl. After mass, Father helped us to make our thanksgiving, and the whole family went home together. We lived at the edge of town at that time on what was really a small farm so we had a grape arbor. Mama told

me to wait in the parlor until she called me for breakfast, which really was breakfast and dinner combined because it was pretty late in the morning. Then she sent my brother Hugh to get me and to my amazement the table had been set under the grape arbor - never do I smell ripe purple grapes without remembering that scene. On the table Mama had spread her most precious white table cloth. The best silver had been brought out. Her treasured dishes were there and everything it seemed to me that you could want to eat was on that table: I was given the place of honor where Papa usually sat at the head. We had a grand time talking about everything and anything, and we sat at the table for hours. When we had finished and had said our grace, I was pretty sure that Mama would say to me, "Now, Mary Jane, go in and take off your good dress and put on your school dress" because in our house we had three types of clothing. We had school clothes, we had work clothes, and we had Sunday clothes. When we came home from school, we got our work clothes out and we wore them until bed time. School clothes were worn only to school. Then our Sunday clothes were just for Sunday or big occasions. And this was a big occasion, so Mama said, "If you're careful, you can wear your dress the rest of the day." I was so happy I was walking on pink clouds.

Shortly after that, we made another move, this time to a small house just outside of Maryville, which was about an hour's ride from Collinsville. Collinsville was where my mother wanted eventually to go because there they had a Sister's School, and she was most anxious that we be put into a Catholic School as soon as possible.

Very soon we did move to Collinsville. By that time I was ready to enter the 7th grade, and we had had some additions to our family. My sister Shan had been born while we were in Springfield. Frances had come along, another sister, and then two brothers, Tom and Andy, had arrived. There were several of us ready to go to school. So my mother and I went to the Catholic School

office to register. While I had always had in the back of my mind the thought of being a sister, it was nebulous, because I didn't know very much about them. I only knew that my mother esteemed them very highly, but I was determined now to really find out about them. So we duly registered, and when we came out, I said to my mother, "Well, that's one order I would never join."

My mother said, "Why not?"

"Well," I said, "they're so wrapped up." (The Ursulines at that time were still wearing the real old style habit.) "They're so wrapped up, all you can see are their noses."

And Mama said, "So it's the dress you're thinking about."

And that really caught me up sharp, and I really began to think deeply and seriously about this thing.

I think there were three O'Laughlins in that Catholic School - myself, my brother, Hugh, and Sarah. I think Frances wasn't yet old enough to start school. I studied my 7th grade teacher very carefully, still thinking pretty seriously about being a sister. I was determined I would have to know a great deal more about them before taking such a tremendous step because I knew that it would be that. By the time I reached the 8th grade or maybe a few months before that, I had begun thinking seriously about this particular order of sisters, the Ursulines. I didn't know any other order, but I was interested in these nuns or sisters because they were then my teachers. By the time I got into the 8th grade that I felt that I could speak to my 8th grade teacher - at least I could find out something about the sisterhood. I knew what they did. I had seen they were very prayerful, I knew they were excellent teachers, and, above all, they were concerned and cared about each other, but further than that, I didn't know. So I managed to appoint myself



as Mother Agnes' after school assistant. I would stay and help her clean the boards. They had no janitor, so we cleaned the classroom and got it ready for the next day. An then in our casual talk I asked her about the order. I said, "Tell me something about the Ursulines."

She said, "Yes, I'll be glad to."

So she told me that the order had been founded in 1535 by St. Angela Merici in Brescia, Italy. At that time the world was in a pretty bad state of disorder and only boys in the upper class really got a thorough education. Girls, especially poor girls, whose families could not afford a governess or a special teacher were simply trained in household chores, and Angela felt that if the world was to be made a better place in which to live all girls should be educated because without good mothers how can the world be made better? So, she said to herself, "I think I'll just begin by teaching the girls around here and then maybe something will come of that."

In the meantime she was getting special graces of life from God and was more and more convinced that this was the work that God wanted her to do. She began with the little girls of her neighborhood and pretty soon other women, seeing what good was coming of this, joined her and before too long there were twelve of them. At that time they lived in their own homes. They met maybe once a month to pray together and to report what had been going on and then gradually it became a little community and they decided it would be better if they could live together and that they did. And then St. Angela called it the Company of St. Ursula. She had a great devotion to St. Ursula because she had been a young girl who with some companions had been martyred for her faith many years before. So St. Angela, because she was humble and didn't want the company (because she didn't foresee that it would grow into an order) to be given her name so she called it "The Company of St. Ursula." From that time they began calling it the Ursulines. The little company spread rapidly

throughout Italy, then into France and into other parts of Europe. The Sisters were doing wonderful work; by that time they were living together and the pupils were coming to them instead of their going out to meet pupils.

During these early days the Sisters were not cloistered, but later on because of disturbed conditions in many cities and because it wasn't safe for any woman to go out on the street alone, St. Charles Borromeo, who was either a bishop or a cardinal at the time and who was connected with the company, thought it would be better to cloister the nuns. That is what happened, and they were pretty strictly cloistered until about 1960, but I'll come back to that later.

As the little company spread, the new world had been discovered, and Blessed Mary (We call her that because one day she will be canonized) Blessed Mary of the Incarnation, an Ursuline in a community in Toulouse, France, was burning with zeal to do something for the girls who would be in these places in the New World. Of course, the first settlements were made in Canada - so she asked and got permission to go herself and take a small group of Sisters with her to Quebec, and that happened in 1639, I'm pretty sure. The Ursulines are still there, still doing good work: More Marie's main object in coming, we must remember, was to teach first of all the little Indian girls and then to accept as pupils the girls of the settlers. Then, later on, in 1727 (that was before New Orleans was a part of what is now the United States) another group of Ursulines made up of Sisters from different convents in Europe who had volunteered to come, established the first convent of any kind in what is now the United States. They are flourishing and it is necessary that we remember that the convent in Quebec and the one in New Orleans had no contact whatsoever. They were independent mother houses.

Gradually other orders began sending Sisters to the new world. Finally a group came to settle in St. Louis. They came from Austria. I have to

mention them especially because among ourselves we call that house in St. Louis our "grandmother." From that house, later on when they secured enough subjects, they sent nuns to Alton, Illinois, and that's where I entered, but there are some things to tell before we get there.

I thanked Mother Agnes for the information she had given me and asked her if some other time she could tell me more, so little by little I learned about the convent's being opened in Alton, what the Sisters did, and how they lived and many other things that drew me towards them. In the meantime I began thinking I had better say something to my confessor about this inclination because it was something I couldn't decide all by myself, even if I felt I had a vocation. So I began talking to Father Degenhardt about it. From time to time I would ask him something about it, and he got to know me very, very well; he was watching, although I didn't know it, the progress of my vocation. And then, one day, sometime early in that 8th grade year, the music teacher, whom I knew well because I had become the Sisters' shopper and would take whatever I had purchased to the front door, said to me, "Mary Jane, when is the last time you thought of being a Sister?"

I was startled. None of them had ever said anything to me, indirectly or directly, and I looked at her in surprise and thought to myself, "What made her say that?" And then I said to her, "Sister, I think about it very, very often."

And she said, "Well, you keep on thinking about it and pray about it and talk to your confessor."

I said, "I think I've been doing just that."

When I got home, I told Mama about this conversation. I really was walking on pink clouds, because I thought, "Well, at least they must think I'm good enough to be a sister." I didn't know that you became a Sister to become good, but I thought you had to be real good before you could be one.

When I told Mama, she was very happy, and she encouraged me all she could and we talked more or less.

Then finally I said to Mother Agnes, "I think I would like to be a Sister, and I think I would like to be an Ursuline."

She wanted to know why, and I told her that I had studied the Sisters, I saw that they were prayerful, that they loved God, that they were very good teachers: by that time I could see that they were really influencing pupils for good. I had that in mind. Then I said, "I noticed, too, that you really care for each other." At that stage in my life that was a great thing, because when you're young, you're looking for love, and it was the kind of love I really wanted, and she said, "I think it wouldn't hurt if you wrote to the Superior in Alton," and in the meantime I suppose she had been telling the Mother to see about me.

So I wrote to her and told her just what I had told Mother Agnes, and I wanted to know how soon I could come. Although I wasn't quite decided, I thought I would find out if they really would take me.

She wrote back, and she told me that I had better wait for a while. I was just finishing the eighth grade. I had all my high school to do, and she told me, "If we did accept you, you would have to go to school with the boarders."

Well, I didn't know exactly what that entailed, but I thought, "Well, I guess I could stand that."

I wrote back and told her that I wanted to come then. If I couldn't come then, I would try to enter someplace else."

There are times in our lives, I think, in God's plan, when you must do certain things. That seemed to be the time when God was calling me.

She said finally, "Well, if you're willing to do as I suggested,

we'll accept you and see that you get your high school work."

Of course, I told Mother Agnes, and the nuns were quite happy about the thing; I told my family and Dad was there, but evidently he didn't give much credence to it. I suppose he thought it was a young girl's notion, and he did not pay very much attention.

After school was out, my mother and I began making things to get me ready. Sister had sent me a list of things I would need, and the sisters got my trunk and began preparing things.

All summer long even when we were working on my things, getting ready to go to the convent, I had fearful temptations. There was the human side of the thing to look at, which was the desire to have a family of my own, a husband, a house to take care of, children, and also all the other things I would be giving up or leaving if I went to the convent.

On the other hand was the powerful spiritual pull, which made me realize that if I had a vocation I certainly ought to follow it. And since I felt so strongly that that was what God wanted me to do, He would certainly give me the grace to follow that vocation. At night-nights were the worst times-when I would kneel by the window, where I loved to say my night prayers, and look up at the sky, I would think, "But what if there isn't any God? What if I'm doing all this and it's not going to be worth anything? What? What? What?"

And then I would say to myself, "How can I with my small mind begin to doubt that there could be a God when men like St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Thomas More and St. Jerome and all the other great saints with their giant intellects could accept that?"

I couldn't talk to Mama about it. I didn't feel she'd understand. Finally, I said, "Well, I'll just go talk to Father Dagenhardt, and he'll

say, 'OK you have no vocation. Just stay home.' And I'll say, 'Goody!.'

So I went to him and I told him the whole story. He looked real hard at me, and he said, "Mary Jane, I am more convinced now than ever that you have a vocation. The devil must perceive that you will be doing some good work, and he is doing his best to prevent it. Now, my advice to you would be to go as quickly as you can."

On the evening of August 28, 1905, the day before I was planning to leave, the neighbors gave a surprise party for me. We had a hilarious time. Everybody, even my father, I think, enjoyed it. When the party was over, and I went to my room to get ready for bed because I knew we would be leaving early in the morning, I heard my father and mother having a rather heated argument. I wasn't concerned until I heard my name and then I knew they were talking about me. I knew that my father was objecting to my going and my mother was pleading on my behalf. And finally, when my father said, "She's too young," my mother said, "I'm pretty sure if she wanted to get married, you wouldn't object."

He had no answer to that.

So then he said, "Who all are going?"

Mama said, "We're all going."

"At what time?"

"At five o'clock in the morning."

"Well, if you're all going, I'm going too."

So early the next morning the whole O'Laughlin family boarded the interurban that would take us to Alton. None of us had ever even seen a big convent. I don't know what the portress thought when she saw that whole gang standing there on the steps. She admitted us graciously and soon different nuns came in to visit us and everybody was so kind and so good.

We spent the whole day there, had dinner together and my family were planning to leave on the four o'clock interurban. When it got nearly time for them to start for the car, my dad stood up and walked over to me. He was never demonstrative but this time he was. He put his arms around me and he said, "Mary Jane, if you can be a Sister like these Sisters, I'll never be sorry for letting you come."

The family proceeded to the interurban, and I sat on the convent porch and cried. Of course, they didn't know that. They reached home in about an hour. That trip was like a funeral. The one in the morning had been a real picnic. We had had loads and loads of fun. But now they were going home without someone.

On September 5, 1905, I received the cape and the cap of the postulant. Two other young ladies, who were supposed to have joined me, came later. In the reception of the postulant's attire, the ceremony was very short. The community prayed with me that God would bless my undertaking, give me the grace of perserverance, and give me the courage, if I found that religious life was not fitted to me or I to it, to return home. I had really two and a half years to decide definitely if I wanted to become a sister. The black cape was placed around my shoulders, and the little lace cap placed on my head. Then the nuns greeted me and were very happy to have another young sister in their midst. Next, the novice mistress conducted me to the novitiate, where I found there were several novices - young nuns who had not made their first vows. Also, there were three young nuns, who were called "juniors". In those days the juniors stayed in the novitiate until the time came three years later to take their final vows. Later the other two young ladies came. We were three postulant nuns. During the time of our postulancy, I discovered that I did not have to go to

school with the boarders. During my noviceship I really had private tutors because some of the retired sisters took me in hand and helped me. I worked at my own rate of speed, which was pretty fast, and I covered quite a bit of my high school work. We novices studied the rules and constitution, not in depth but at least to get some idea of them. We studied the schedule of the house, and I found, to my astonishment, that we had four hours daily of prayer. Even the sisters who were in school observed, and we still do, that same schedule. That included time for meditation, for spiritual reading, for the recitation of the office, which is composed of psalms, hymns, and short prayers, and added to that we said daily the Rosary of our Lady, at least five decades of it, and made the stations of the cross.

I learned, too, that there were hours of silence and that was very new to me because at home we never stopped talking! And we had such good times together that later on I found out that the neighbors called us the "Laughing O'Laughlins". My mother was jolly, and in spite of all the hard things she had to do, she still could find time to laugh, make us laugh, and we were forever, ever singing.

I found that the novitiate was located in one wing of the building. The rooms belonged to the convent proper, but they were set aside for the use of the postulants, the novices, and the juniors. The postulants' life covered a period of six months. Then we received the habit. Later on I'm going to tell about that reception day because it was a very beautiful thing. Then in about two years' time we made our first vows. We still remained in the novitiate while we were juniors, although later on that was changed. I'll explain that, too, when we come to it.

Each day we had two periods for recreation - an hour immediately after dinner and again an hour in the evening. On feast days, Sundays, and holidays there were also times of recreation. I remember very well my first Fourth of July. That was an all day recreation, which was very uncommon. We



really were free that day to do pretty much the things we wanted to do. So the novices and postulants formed a kitchen band and we serenaded the community.

Once a month on the second Sunday our families were permitted to visit us. And we always had gay times when they came. We could write and receive letters during our noviceship. The letters that we received were always of the greatest interest to us because they kept us in touch with our family life and with what was going on outside the convent.

Towards the beginning of January, 1906, we postulants began our preparation for reception day. The date was set for January 27, 1906. During the first weeks of January, we were measured for our new habits, our cinctures, and our white veils and all the other new things that would go with our lives as sisters. All this preparation had to be made ahead of the retreat time because before reception we made an 8-day retreat and during that time of prayer and consideration and silence we tried very hard not to think of material things.

During the weeks of preparation we were very conscious that we were taking the second step that would make us become brides of Christ, and to make this more solemn, on reception day we really were attired as brides. We were taken to the room in which the bridal gowns for reception day were kept. We selected the gown and veil that we'd like to wear and we were properly fitted for reception day. It was set aside, and we tried not to think about it during our retreat. What we were most intent in thinking about was the fact that on that day we were taking that second step that that would make us later brides of Christ.

The morning of January 27 gave me a lovely surprise. When I looked out the window, I saw that the world, like today when I'm recording, was

blanketed with snow. I love snow and that added to my joy. The sister who had been appointed to help me dress as a bride came, and she quickly helped me to get dressed. When I left my room in the convent to meet the other postulants, I was astonished at how beautiful they looked. We didn't have mirrors in those days, so I didn't know how I looked, but I knew how they looked, and it really made me very, very happy.

We were met at the cloister door by our little girl "angels", girls dresses in white, each carrying a silver tray on which lay a folded habit, the cincture with our long rosary, and our white veil. It had been planned that my sister Frances would be my "angel", but during the practice time before reception day, we discovered that she, being only seven, could not manage the big tray. So she was appointed then to carry the smaller tray on which lay Sister Dorothy's ring and crucifix; Sister Dorothy was a novice who was being professed, making her first vows on that same day. Together, beside each of us, our angels walked down the aisle. We filed into one front pew and Sister Dorothy into the other. Our angels went forward, placing the silver trays on the communion railing. Then mass was begun. I had noticed, when we were coming into chapel, that my family was there except my father. Later, I found that he had been elected a delegate to a miners' convention. Of course, I missed him very much. Andrew, who was only two, kept saying to Mama, "Which is Mary Jane? Which one is Mary Jane?"

Mama gave him her rosary, and he dangled and played with that. Then finally he dropped a dime Mama had given him on the floor, and he just begged to go and get it. Finally Mama shushed him on some way, I don't know how, and as Mass went on, he really did become more quiet. Father paused in an early part of the Mass and came to the communion rail and blessed our habits.

Then for the first time I realized why they were called "holy habits". They were blessed.

Immediately after the blessing of the habit, our angels went forward, each picking up the tray containing the habit her novice would wear. Then, preceding us, we went to the cloister door, where Sister met us and took the habit. Our angels waited for us outside the cloister door. In a very short time we had changed from our bridal attire into the blessed habit which we hoped we would wear always. And then we returned to chapel. We went directly to the communion railing, where Father was waiting for us. He blessed each one of us particularly and as gave the blessing he bestowed upon each of us our own new names, the name that we would bear as Sisters the rest of our days. In those days we did not choose our names. They were chosen by the Superior or the Novice Mistress. The name that I received was completely unfamiliar to me so that later, when we came from chapel after Mass, someone asked me, "What is your new name?"

I said, "I don't know. I don't know what Father said."

Then Mother Bernard stepped forward and said, "Your name is Sister Mary Eugenia." And then, of course, I heard the names of the other two.

And now we will go back to the completion of the Mass.

After Mass, during which we received Holy Communion, and just before the communion, Sister Dorothy, who was making her vows, with her angel went to the communion railing and knelt there, promising poverty, chastity, and obedience, to be true to Christ for the rest of her days. Then Father blessed the ring and placed it on her finger and gave her the crucifix, a rather large one, which she would wear over her heart.

We novices, of course, did not receive the ring or the curcifix. These were given only when we would later make our vows.

During that reception day my family and I and the other families, who had just become known to each other at that time, had a very happy time and in the evening, after they had left and we had said our night prayers and were ready for bed, I reached out and touched the hem of that long black habit, which I hoped some day I would wear even in death.

But times have changed and later on, as I tell my story, you will learn that today I'm dressed quite differently. You will also learn that the reception ceremony, as I have described it here, is very much simpler. In fact, I feel that we have lost something in dispensing with these things or in changing them, but after all, we're living in a modern age and St. Angela, our founder, told us that we would need to change because the order would go on and on, and she told us then if changes are necessary, make them after due consultation and prayer and consideration. As I continue, you will see how we have adapted ourselves to this request of hers.

The period of novitiate or the time during which we were novices, covered two years and during that time many changes were being made. Our convent and many others had joined the Roman Union. I would like to explain that here, but I think it would take too long.

And so, on January 27, 1906, my life as a white-veiled novice, as an Ursuline Sister, began. During this time, again, we did no teaching. We studied not only our rules and constitution, the meaning of the vows we would take on our vow day, but we also did some secular studying, and by the time I finished my novitiate, I had finished a great part of my high school work. Toward the end of the novitiate period, we went to Dallas, Texas, to finish a part of our training, and it was there, on February 22, 1908, my companions and I made our first vows. It sometimes seems odd that it would have been on that day, but since our novitiate there in Dallas was a part of the community and that was a boarding school, we had to find

a day that would be free that would not be a Sunday, and it happened that Washington's birthday was that day. So forever after, Washington's birthday has been a red letter day for me.

Our vow day was preceded by another eight day retreat. By that time we had definitely decided that we wanted to be sisters, that we wanted to make vows, that with God's help we would be able to keep them. So on that morning of February 22, my two companions and I returned to Alton.

Since this was the middle of the year, there were no open places for teachers. All of them had been assigned, at the beginning of the school year. We novices - Oh, I forgot! I'm not a novice any more - I'm professed! We young professed juniors, as we were called, had time again to do a great deal of studying and a great deal of helping around the house, where help was needed. Many, many times we substituted in the two parochial schools of the city. I remember one day that I substituted in the morning at one of them and in the afternoon at the other.

In this way we really had our practice teaching and it was very good experience for us. When summer came and school closed, we had our annual retreat and right at the end of the retreat, which usually closed on the 15th of August, we were given our assignments, and I was assigned to teach in the old Cathedral School which was located in Alton, Illinois. At that time, the old school, which was very dilapidated, was down in a hollow, and we knew that a new school would eventually be erected. I didn't expect it to be put up in my time, but it really happened. The new school was built right next to the Cathedral itself.

The next year when assignments were given out, I was again, as we say, missioned to the Cathedral School. By this time the new school had been built so my first two years of teaching experience were gained there.

And I think you might enjoy this. There were five of us on the faculty: Sisters Angela, Magdalene, Eugenia, Loretta, and Catherine. Sister Loretta was a real witty person and one day she said something about being the tail of the camel. We were nonplussed. We couldn't imagine what she was talking about.

She said, "Well, stop a minute and think."

We still couldn't figure it out.

She said, "All right. On this faculty there's Catherine, Angela, Magdalene, Eugenia, and Loretta - she's the tail of the camel!"

When the appointments came out after our retreat in 1911, I discovered that I had been missioned to Decatur.

Sixty-eight years ago, when I, a 22-year old sister, stepped from the Wabash train, in the small town of Decatur (population 30,000 at that time) I little dreamed that I was going to live there the rest of my days. My companion, Sister Edmund, and I were met by a courteous gentleman who guided us to a coach. I discovered later that this coach was one of J. J. Moran's funeral coaches and that the gentleman was one of the chauffeurs. We reached the convent, which was very near the station, just in time for lunch. The nuns who were there already gathered around us and welcomed the two of us very gladly. It was great to have two more young sisters added to their staff. After lunch, which we enjoyed, we were given a tour of the house. As we went from room to room, I heard one of the nuns who had been in Decatur telling Sister Edmund something about that house having been a hotel at one time. This intrigued me, and being intensely interested in history of any kind, I determined to learn the history of that house, and this I did pretty shortly.

I discovered, in my probing and testing and questioning, that that

house had been built in 1854. It had been planned by a Mr. Humphrey, who had foreseen the need for a hotel in that location. The building contained twelve rooms. It had been built of some of the first hand-made bricks in Decatur. They were porous, and the moisture easily seeped through, as did the cold. The only way they could heat the house was by the use of two stoves - heaters which certainly didn't keep the place very comfortable. The hotel was successful for a time but later on, Mr. Humphrey went bankrupt. Then the building passed into the hands of a Mr. Murphy. He used it as a boarding house for quite a while. About 1865 or so the pastor of St. Patrick's church at that time planned to bring teaching sisters to Decatur. He therefore rented the former hotel to be used as a convent. He brought a group of Canadian sisters, not Ursulines, and they lived in the house for perhaps five years. These sisters spoke only French. They were so far from their Mother house and there were so many difficulties that they abandoned the attempt to start a school. But they had begun it under the name of "The Academy of St. Teresa" and it has borne that name even to this date. After this group left, another pastor, or perhaps it was the same one, went to New York to obtain sisters to staff the school. We could never understand why he did this since he had a relative in the Dominican order in Springfield, Illinois, which was very near, and there were also Ursuline sisters in that same city. However, he did that. He went to New York, and a group of eight Ursuline sisters came. The remarkable thing about them was the fact that all of them were in their twenties. Among them was a little sister named Sister Baptista Harte and in March of 1873 she became ill, died, and was buried in the priest's lot in our Calvary Cemetery here in the city. For many years no real record concerning her was unearthed until I began doing some research and then I found that she had come with this group. Evidently she had been praying for somebody's conversion,

and it seems to me that she must have promised God that she would go on this mission and would He please grant the conversion. Now, we don't know if the conversion came about for sure, but I myself am positive that God could not have failed to answer that prayer. Later, when I was doing the research, I wrote to Sister Rose Finan in New York and she gave me the details I have just enumerated.

This group of sisters remained only one year, from the summer of 1872 to the close of school in 1873. Then they returned to New York.

Before proceeding, I would like to correct an idea which many people have about the location of the old convent. I would like to show, too, the progress that has been made.

In 1872 the corner house on Eldorado and Jackson Streets on the North side was the Peter Mooney home. Next to it was Dr. Fitzpatrick's home, and then the old convent was the third building in that block.

Today the Armory covers the site on which these three buildings stood.

When I came to Decatur, I discovered that if I stood on the front porch of the convent and the doors of St. Patrick's church were open, I could look directly into the sanctuary.

In the summer of 1873 the pastor of St. Patrick's decided to contact the Alton community to obtain six sisters and that group was headed by Mother Teresa Gillespie, who in the capacity of being Superior really is regarded as the foundress of that house as far as Ursulines are concerned.

By that time St. Patrick's parish had purchased the Murphy house to be used as a permanent convent.

When the nuns arrived, they naturally followed the rules of our order and only girls were taught in the academy. There was a school somewhere near where boys were taught by the Christian Brothers. Then in 1882 a building east of the convent, quite a large building at that time, was erected and



both boys and girls were taught in the same classes.

These early sisters endured very many hardships and things were not much better when I came to Decatur in 1911, although we did have steam heat and the rooms had been renovated to such an extent that they were at least endurable, but as the days passed we found that we definitely could not live in that building very much longer.

In the summer of 1912 we elected Mother Celestine O'Rourke as our Superior. After her election, we were sitting around visiting with our Provincial, when she said to Mother O'Rourke, "There is only one thing that worries me."

And Mother said, "What's that?" and she said, "The fact that you're all so young."

And Mother replied, smilingly, "We will correct that fault day by day."

And certainly we have done that! Only two of the twelve who were in that group are still living. Those two are Sister Paul Brewer and I, Sister Eugenia.

Mother Celestine was very intelligent, energetic, and far-seeing. We all knew that we had property - a 33-acre tract of land on the north side of the city on the Bloomington road, but we certainly had no funds.

But Mother Celestine, who had a great trust in Divine Providence, determined that we were going to get a building on that tract of land as soon as possible. So she and her counselors went to Lawyer Fitzgerald and explained the situation to him. He inquired more deeply concerning the funds we had. When Mother replied that we had none, all we had was the property, he sat back and looked at them in amazement and said, "Well, you people are either angels or fools."

Mother said laughingly, "Whichever we are, we need the loan." And they got it.

In the meantime great activities were going on. Since the old St.

Patrick's School, which we had been using, was so dilapidated, a new school had to be built. So the old church, which stood on the corner of North and Jackson was demolished, and a new school was built there. It was ready for occupancy by February, 1913. And what a joy it was - to move into a school like that! Eight rooms, polished floors, single seats. It just was unbelievable. Of course, we did all we could to keep it in prime condition.

By the early months of spring, plans for the new building which we hoped to erect were almost perfected. We had in mind just one wing of a much larger building which we hoped to build later on. We were to have a main building and a wing similar to the one that was being planned. By the beginning of May plans were ready to be carried out, and on May 12, 1913, the ground was broken for the beginning of the wing that we had hoped to erect first. By August 15 of that same year, 1913, the framework was up, and Mother Celestine was anxious for all of us to get at least a peek at what was going to be our future home. She and her counselors had been out many times, but the rest of us had not seen it. So on August 15 we had an all-day picnic here on the convent grounds. The carpenters were busy at work when we arrived. We came, I think, in carriages. But, Miss Margaret Burke, who was a very good driver, who had helped us many times when we needed transportation in the city (by the way, she was the first woman licensed driver in Macon County and the second in the state) was driving her own car. The remainder of the group came in buggies or carriages. We arrived almost at noontime and Miss Burke and her friend, Miss Hayes, who later became known as Sister Isabel here at St. Teresa, prepared our lunch. In the meantime we younger nuns ran as fast as we could to the framework of the building and began climbing ladders, walking over the joists, balancing on beams until we had the carpenters speechless.

We explored every nook and corner that we possibly could. Just about that time the two ladies called us for lunch. We had an immense lunch, so immense that we invited the carpenters to share it, and they very happily acquiesced. We laughed and talked for some time. Then the girls shooed us away and told us to go look at the grounds, which we did. We found, to our dismay, almost, that we really were going to be the lonely house on the hill. The only other buildings around were Downings' place, the little Jones school, a part of the Macon County Hospital, the Oglesby School, and the Pythian Home. As we went over the property, we discovered running probably through the center of it a little creek that we had not known was there. We young people had great fun holding up our skirts and jumping from one side of the creek to the other. As we walked over the grounds, we were amazed at how large it really was. It seemed so great compared to the small yard at the old convent where we had only narrow walks to go up and down. Finally the girls called us. They had already packed the picnic things into the vehicles. We climbed in very tired but very happy. Now we could hardly wait until the whole building was completed.

By December 22, 1913, that dream had come true. When we went out a few days before moving time we just couldn't believe our eyes. Fifty big rooms: Such a palace to live in! We just couldn't believe it. Then on the 22nd of December Father Murphy dismissed St. Patrick's at noon so that the faculty there could come out to help with the moving. The vans came early in the morning - I think there were two of them and they were loaded. It took quite a bit of loading to get everything in although we had sent a great deal of the furniture out ahead of time. And when, later on the evening of December 22, we wanted to set up beds, we found they were piled under all the other furniture. So we had to unpack everything to get to them. We did that and had to carry them up four flights of steps - we had no

elevator at that time. And almost before we knew it, it was supper time which comes at our house at 6 o'clock. We didn't have any table. We had no chairs, except, I think, one. But we decided we would use one of the big rooms on the first floor as our dining room. One of the nuns, Sister Gabriel, who wasn't able to help with the unpacking, had been busily peeling peaches - no, apples, I mean - and she had made apple sauce. For our supper that evening we had apple sauce, tea, and bread and butter, and for many days after that that was our daily menu. We finally got Mother Celestine, our superior, settled in the chair. All of the young people sat on the floor, Turk-fashion, and we had a delightful time eating our supper. We went to bed good and tired but happy.

Christmas Eve came almost before we knew it, but we had things pretty well straightened up and we were ready for our first Christmas in our new home. Of course, we had no resident pastor and therefore we had to attend Mass at St. Patrick's. We did this by starting out, some of us, to attend the 5 o'clock mass and I think we went on the trolley car, at least some of us did. Then J. J. Moran's had sent out some coaches. Some of the sisters attended the later mass in these coaches. This became our regular Sunday schedule for quite a long time.

Because of this schedule, Sunday morning breakfast extended some times until noon.

On December 30 the new academy was blessed, and it was formally opened to students in January, 1914. Of course, this was a school for girls only, and it was in the building that had just been dedicated. It was only later on that new buildings were added.

Of course, St. Patrick's staff still continued to teach in St. Patrick's school. We went out to teach every morning and returned in the evening,

and those were very hard trips. We had to make the most of them by trolley car and, because there were no paved roads or streets, it was very difficult to get back and forth. Very often we had to stand on Marietta Street waiting for the cars when we transferred, because then we were outside the city limits. We didn't come in, if you can believe it, until 1952. No deliveries were made to people who lived in this area. At any rate, the St. Patrick's staff had to be the delivery boys. The sister who had charge of the buying would see to it that we had gotten the necessary bread, the milk, the meat, and whatever else would be needed for the next few days. Some very funny things happened because of this system. One day Sister Edmund had some loaves of bread, (which by the way were not wrapped separately, in those days) in her arms. Somehow or other when she stepped into the trolley car, the man behind her was very close to her. She dropped a loaf of bread. He didn't see it and consequently kicked it to the other end of the car. Of course we nuns, who always see the funny side of things, burst out laughing. The other passengers joined in. Little things like that, which seemed so silly at the time were, when I look back, really important, because it was through those little things that people began to realize what kind of people we were. Some of them had no idea what sisters were like.

Then another day somebody who was carrying the milk pail bumped against the bucket and the lid flew off and went sailing down the aisle. We had another good laugh.

And other incidents happened too. We were doing our best to reach out to people, to make friends with them, to let them know us as human beings. Little by little we did manage to break down a great deal of their reserve. They did become very friendly.

But there was one lady that we just didn't seem able to reach at all. One morning when we got on the trolley car there was no empty seat except right next to her. So one of the sisters asked if she might sit there. The lady rather curtly acquiesced and Sister sat down. Then she began talking to the lady. At first, she didn't respond very well but little by little as we went day after day, she became friendly enough to talk to us. Then we invited her to come over to the convent sometime.

During the summer we had to do our housecleaning because there was no other time to do the thorough cleaning that housewives do in the spring. We had our habits hooked, our gingham aprons on, our sleeves rolled back, and our veils pinned up. We just happened to be cleaning the parlor and the front hall. The door bell rang and one of the nuns dressed, just as she was in her scrub outfit, went to the door and who was there but our friend. The sister spoke to her, and she was so astonished she couldn't answer. She just looked at all of us - and then she said, "I never dreamed that you people could do work like that! I thought all you did was teach school and crochet."

In those early days we really suffered in many ways. We were trying very hard to get the debt paid on our house as fast as we could. In order to supplement our meager salaries, we raised vegetables and sold them. We had chicken fries, we had bazaars, and we had ice cream socials. We invited everyone to come to these events. They served two purposes, at least the last few named ones. People came from all over the city - Catholics and non-Catholics alike. In that way we became known to many people and we made many friends. I would like to say right here that we owe a debt to the people of Decatur, both Catholic and non-Catholic, that we can never repay.

Although we attended masses on Sunday at St. Patrick's, we had mass once or twice a week in the convent chapel in those days. Father Andrew Smith, who was the assistant pastor at St. Patrick's came out either to say mass or to give us Holy Communion. Sometimes he would get only as far as the Downing home and because of snowdrifts or great puddles of mud that he couldn't pedal through: he would hide his bicycle in the bushes at Downing House and come the rest of the way on foot.

In 1915 we had the joy of securing a resident priest - a refugee priest from Mexico, Father Chipparo. For the next few years we had a resident priest.

Our first Sunday mass was I think, in June after Father came, and it was a joy to be able to have our own services in our own chapel and have a regular schedule on Sunday.

As I mentioned before, we had gone to school most of the time and to church also either by trolley car or in Moran's coaches. Later on, someone gave us an old horse - an old mare - named Nellie. With the horse came a two-seated surrey with the fringe on top.

One day when Sister Alberta offered to drive, four of us had been out in the surrey for some reason or other and on the way home we noticed that some men were building a new sidewalk, but we failed to notice something else and as Sister Alberta drove along, one wheel of our surrey got tangled with the handle of the wheelbarrow. Mr. Ryan, the foreman, came to help us extricate ourselves and then he said, "Well, I knew you girls were poor, but I didn't think you were so poor that you'd steal a poor man's wheelbarrow."

Making these trips over the unpaved muddy or snowy roads was really hazardous and there was another thing that added to our fright some times.

Between Downing's house and the little Jones School was what we called the "Grandfather Cottonwood Tree". It was very tall and its roots extended all over the road. It was about fourteen feet in circumference so it didn't give very much room to pass by. When we went under it, the branches hung so low that they brushed the top of the vehicle we were in and very often if the driver wasn't careful and got too close to the tree, where the roots were very thick, we would be tumbled from side to side like play things.

I think in 1915 - at least about ten years after I had been in the convent - I saw my first movie. We never went to movies, of course, because we were semi-cloistered and we never went to any place like a theater, but someone had offered in some way to get a movie for the boarders and we sisters had the privilege of seeing it too. I, not knowing anything about movies, didn't want to miss a thing. So I went up to the very front row and sat down there. It was "Ben Hur" and when in the chariot race the horses began getting bigger and bigger and they kept coming closer and closer I got up and started out of the gym. One of the nuns grabbed me by the sleeve and said, "Where are you going?"

I said, "Out! I don't want to get run over."

She said, "Look!" pointing to the screen. And then I saw that there was another scene, and it dawned on me that it wasn't real at all. Since that day to this, I've loved movies and watch them any time I can.

In 1916 we had the joy of winning a car through the efforts of Catholics and non-Catholics alike. I don't exactly know how the voting was done but we won a bright, shiny Pan-American and were we ever proud! We all gathered around it and we couldn't look at it enough. Then it dawned on us that we sisters, and we weren't permitted to drive a car. What were we going to do? Then our good friend, Miss Burke, offered to drive for us as much as



she could. That she did, and we had a great deal of use out of that car. Previous to this time, we had gone back and forth in our big horse drawn bus.

In 1918 or somewhere about then, someone had given us a very large beautiful American flag. In some way or other we had a flag pole erected on the south side of the building quite near to the building. In those days soldiers were everywhere. You would meet them every place you went. Sister Edmund had charge of raising the flag. One morning at 6 o'clock when she went to put it up, she heard a noise on the road. She knew some vehicle was coming, but she didn't pay attention until she heard floating on the morning air the strains of the "Star Spangled Banner" Men's voices singing lustily. She turned around and there was an army jeep full of soldiers. Every man was on his feet, and they sang the first stanza as Sister stood quietly waiting for them to finish. Then they saluted smartly, stood for a few minutes in silence, and went on their way. Sister came in the house with tear drops on her lashes.

In the meantime besides teaching school we were busily engaged in praying and studying. Early in the 1920's it became mandatory that teachers hold degrees. Our sisters began immediately to earn these. They did it by dint of going to summer school, by taking correspondence courses, and using all free time to study if you could say there was any free time after all the things were done. But anyway now they all hold degrees, and in this house at the moment there are two who hold doctorates, and one has degrees in so many varied subjects that she can teach almost anything.

Later, we were delighted that we had done this. By 1928 we wanted to complete the building we had planned. When Mother Celestine (or whoever was Superior) went to the Bishop to get the necessary permission, he said,

"You know, Sister, I think that your idea of a boarding school isn't a good one because people have cars; they can go back and forth. It's so much easier for them to get about now. What you need in Decatur is a co-ed school. The girls all along have had a place - a Catholic school they could go to. The boys have not had that opportunity. You have that property. I will give you permission, after you think it over, to make a drive and then I will ask you to build a high school on your property and to use your sisters to staff it."

It didn't take us long to consider the matter. If the Bishop thought that was the best thing to do, then that's what we would do. So St. Teresa High School came into being and was opened, I think, in 1931 with about 130 students. This year (1979) there were 525 enrolled.

Later another building of classrooms was added to the original one, and a gym built. Both boys and girls have been outstanding not only in the academic world but also the world of sports. Right now it looks as if we're headed for state, and I hope we get there.

By 1930 Decatur had acquired another Catholic parish. St. Thomas school had been opened. Now we have five. Remember when I first came we had two - so we have made progress.

Definitely public schools have also been advancing, but since I know more about parochial schools I'm mentioning them in particular.

I spent one year teaching in Belen, New Mexico. That would be a story in itself, and I do have it written somewhere. That was the most unusual year of my teaching life.

But I would like to go on to 1935 because in that year I suffered a very badly fractured hip. It was so bad that they didn't think I would ever walk again so I was out of school for two years.

When I resumed teaching, I was sent again to St. Patrick's. I had taught two years at St. Thomas. In fact I was on the faculty at that school when I had that accident. When I returned to St. Patrick's, my eye condition had worsened, and my eye doctor advised me to ask to take a lower grade. Up until this time I had been teaching the seventh and eighth grades or the eighth grade alone for a number of years. When I went back to school, I had the fifth grade. I found that fifth graders were as lively as crickets, and just as noisy. But they were a great group to work with. They were eager to learn. They were willing to believe they didn't know everything. And they just went right along with whatever I wanted them to do, generally.

Then before Christmas a little committee came to me and said, "Sister, we want to put on a Christmas play."

I said, "Oh, great! That's going to take a big weight off my shoulders."

They said, "You can't know anything about it because it's going to be for you. And we're going to practice at our homes and you can't know anything until the day we put it on."

Well, that was great, so they went off and I went about my business.

About two weeks before Christmas they came and they said, "Sister, we want a poem for our play. We've got everything else ready, but we need a poem."

And I said, "Well, the library is full of books of poetry - Christmas poems too."

But they said, "But we don't want that kind."

I said, "What kind do you want?"

And they said, "One that you write."

I said, "Me? Write a poem? I've never written a poem in my life."  
I told them that.

The bell rang for recess about that time. During recess I said to myself, "You're their teacher - you can't let them down."

So when they came in, I said, "You know, I've got an idea. Why couldn't we write that poem together? And then it would belong to all of us."

They clapped their hands, and I knew then that plan was all right. So we began, right after the morning recess. We made a vocabulary of all the Christmas words we could think of. Then we selected the theme, and finally somebody gave us the first line. We worked the whole day, and finally by the time school closed, we had a fairly good poem - the very first one I had ever tried to write. We called it "Another Wise Man", because each of us had decided to pretend to be another wise man, and we had decided what gifts we would bring - the gold would represent our acts of obedience, and frankincense would be our prayers, and the myrrh would be the little sacrifices we would make.

The next morning I was going through the dining room downstairs and I noticed the laundry flapping on the line and I immediately got the idea of writing - "Wash Day at Nazareth" so I grabbed a pencil and in a minute I had written my second poem. From that time on I was writing poetry and my pupils were writing poetry. I never knew what I was going to find on my desk. People at home would get so angry at them. One little girl got an idea during the night and she had to get up right then and write her poem. She did, and it was good. Later on, I know that some of them at least had some poetry published.

My next appointment was to teach in Oconee, Illinois. While I was there, my mother and two sisters, Shan and Fran, came to visit me. During a lull in the conversation, I brought out some of these poems just as a topic for talking over. Shan, who was an established writer, having had

many things published, said, "Give those to me," after she had read several.

I asked, "What are you going to do with them?"

She replied, "Market them."

I objected, "Nobody would buy those things."

She said, "Wait and see."

She took them with her, and I really almost forgot they were gone.

I got busy with school work and this and that until about five weeks later when I received checks for the five she had sent in. Then, of course, I was walking on pink clouds. I went to work writing even with more energy than I had done before. That was the beginning of my writing career because up to the present time I have had published thirty-two poems, twenty-five articles, eight short stories, one crossword puzzle, many anecdotes, and I have also written the house history of our Decatur community. From that history many of the things that I have recorded have been taken.

It's a very good thing that I had taught myself to type and that my sisters had provided me with an Underwood typewriter. It's also a very good thing that I have that machine because now that I have almost lost my sight, without it, I would not be able to continue my writing. As it is, I can do my first copy and get someone to retype the final copies. Right here I would like to say that I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Mrs. Mary O'Mara, one of my former pupils, who for many, many years - as long as I was in Decatur - did all my final copies. I think if I didn't have this hobby of writing, of doing creative writing, and of being able to use my typewriter, I would probably be sitting somewhere chewing my finger nails instead of pounding away at those old typewriter keys.

My latest publication, titled "Social Worker Pioneer," appeared in the magazine, Voice of Fatima on February 28, 1979.

In 1958 I at the age of sixty-nine, celebrated my golden jubilee. (Now I am the first sister in the Decatur community to have a seventieth anniversary celebration.) Everybody went to the very limits in preparing for the golden anniversary - my family and also my religious sisters. Father Janas Meare, the first of my pupils to be ordained a priest, said the mass, and he preached a homily. Present were the living members of my immediate family, my mother, my three sisters and my three brothers. My father had died in 1914 and my youngest brother, Joe, in 1925, the day before his sixteenth birthday. Shan, who was the private secretary to the Director of Transportation at the State House, Frances, who was the head bookkeeper at Weaver's; Jetta, my youngest sister, who had been born five years after I entered, also a state employee attended. My brother Andrew was not able to be there. He had had a coronary and was hospitalized. He was a professor at Springfield Junior College and Dean there for seventeen years. My brother Tom, who was a lineman, and my brother Hugh, who was also a state employee, and my 84 year old mother were there. She had to come in a wheel chair because she was so crippled with arthritis. She was beautiful. Her serene smile always made her beautiful. Her hair, that had once been so black, was now a silver gray - or really a silver white. Her gray eyes were still clear and very alert to what was going on around her. She wore the brooch that Dad so long ago had given her, and her wedding ring sparkled in the candle light. Her earrings, which her mother had given her, hung from her ears. They really were heirlooms and, had I not come to the convent, I would have been the next person to have inherited them.

The mass on that day was the last that my mother was able to attend. She died just a few years later. I was not able to go to her funeral

because we Ursulines were not then given the permission for home visits.

After Vatican II, many changes came about in the church and also in religious orders. We have to remember that the church has God's laws, as all churches do, and like all churches, it has its own laws, which it has made. God's laws can never be changed - for example, the Ten Commandments. But any church law can be changed by the church; for example, Catholics had always abstained from meat on Friday until after that council. That was one of the changes that was made. We now may abstain from meat if we wish, but it is no longer a command. Along with those changes came changes in religious orders and one of the first ones was a change in the style of dress as far as the Ursulines are concerned. Since 1900 we had worn the same kind of habit. Then about 1966 the dress was modernized; now, we can wear any kind of dress modern ladies wear if we keep within certain lines. We must always be dressed in such a way that seculars will recognize us as sisters. We also wear the ring, which we got on our vow day, we wear a crucifix on a chain around our neck; and we wear the veil. With special permission sisters may go without them, but that has to be a permission that's asked and obtained. Personally, I think the veil is the thing that really shows people that we are sisters. If we're dressed in just any kind of dress or just think they'll know from the crucifix - lots of people wear crucifixes - or from the ring that one is a religious, we're mistaken; but when they see the veil on your head, they recognize you as a nun.

In conjunction with these changes, we were also permitted to make home visits. In the beginning we were given permission to go once a year for two weeks. Now it has become possible to go at any time when we feel we're needed - for example, if there is some one very ill in our homes, we may

visit them. If there is a wedding, we may go home for that. If there are other occasions of importance and our families would like us to come, we have the permission to go.

As soon as this permission was granted, my sisters decided that it would be very nice when I would make my first home visit, which would be sixty-four years after I had left home, that we visit New Orleans because of the articles I had written were connected with the beautiful statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succour in our convent there; as I mentioned before, it was the first convent erected in what is now the United States. I got special permission to go by plane. Thus I had my first plane ride.

Then later on, my sisters and I went by car to visit our Mother's relatives, most of whom lived in Oklahoma. Being non-Catholic they had very little contact with Sisters, and I think they were just a little bit hesitant how to treat me. But, then a funny thing happened that really broke the ice. Our first stop was in Joplin, Missouri, to visit our cousins, Dean and Iris Coons. They were just coming home from shopping or work and were driving in to their home at the same time we drove in. I stepped out of the car and started to meet them. I had to go up a little incline. In the meantime Dean and Iris were coming toward us. I stumbled and would have fallen flat on my face if Dean hadn't been there to catch me. Well, then we all broke into delighted laughter and from that time on, they knew I was like everybody else - I could fall on my face too.

Within the next few days we went to visit other relatives in Oklahoma - all of them devout Methodists. They, too, I think, didn't know exactly how to act towards me, and I had almost the same experience that I had had with Dean. I stumbled, somebody caught me, we all laughed, and the ice was broken.



We stayed there only one evening because our time was limited.

Our next long trip was to Sparta, where I had made my First Holy Communion. On the way home we had an accident that frightened us almost to death. The girls - that is Shan and Fran - were going to change places driving. Frances had gotten out to go to the other side of the car to take the wheel. She was in back of the car, directing Shan who was backing up. Suddenly, she yelled, "Stop".

Then we didn't hear anything. We were sure that the car had hit her, and that she was under it somewhere. We stepped out of the car and as I did so, not seeing her I said, "Oh, God! We've killed her."

With that, she yelled, "I've shattered my hip!" and we saw that in order to avoid the car, she had jumped over a ditch and had landed sitting on a culvert. By that time people - we were amazed at how good everyone was - they came from everywhere. The lady in the farmhouse on the hill with her son - the two ladies in the car back of us, one of them luckily a trained nurse, the man in the car coming from the opposite direction all did everything they could to help. Shan said, "What are we going to do? Shall we take her in to the nearest town and put her in the hospital there or take her on to Springfield?"

The nurse said, "If I were you and if we can possibly get her in the back of your car, I would advise that you go on to Springfield. You're almost there."

And that's what we did. She was hospitalized six weeks, and I stayed with Shan during that time. Fran got along very well; they fixed a room in our home downstairs so when she was convalescent she got back home and along very nicely.

On April 23, 1978, while I was in Springfield, a very strange thing

happened. I had been on a home visit, and I had planned to go back on the Thursday before the 23rd and one of my sisters said, "Could you wait until Sunday? So many things have piled up and we could take you then more easily."

I agreed: Sunday morning early the phone rang, and my Superior, Sister Albeus, told me that we had had a very bad fire. My sisters didn't think it could be much of a fire. She said for me not to come home because of the fire.

But, I said, "I'm going home. I want to see what happened."

So the whole family drove over in the afternoon. We were all shocked at the destruction that had taken place. If I had been home, I would certainly have died - if not from the flames, certainly from the smoke. The firemen said no one could have been rescued from my room which was just above the one that was destroyed.

Because of this fire and the resulting lack of rooms available in the house, I am now staying with the Ursulines in Springfield at 1400 N. 5th Street and have time to reminisce.

When I look back, I remember that before I had entered the convent I thought that I wanted to stay in the world and have a home of my own and have children and just be like my mother and other people. But when the fire occurred, and the Springfield Ursulines welcomed me with open arms, I said to myself, "You don't have just one home. You have hundreds of them; any Ursuline House would accept you."

And then I said to myself, "You wanted children." And then as I looked back over the years and counted how many possible students I had had - it came to more than 2000. Then I said, "Well, no mother could ever have that many children."

And then I had wanted a husband. But now, because I was a bride, a spouse of Christ, I had the most powerful, the most loving, the most understanding of all to be my spouse.

In closing I would like to say, this story, if I had not come to the convent, would have been told very differently; it came about only because eighty-four years ago a five-year old girl asked her mother, "Mama, Mama, who is God?"

